



Living Memory

2024

Shane Moran

Review of Shane Moran, *Living Memory: Covid Texts*, South Africa, 2024

Living Memory is a remarkable diary, not just a record of events, but an attempt to grasp and understand them, “at once a personal, emotional process and a conceptual, philosophical exercise.” (“Preface”) There are 44 dated entries that carry the reader through sixteen months of the most intense passage of the COVID years. The global reach of that crisis means that we can all share “the opportunity to relive what many would like to forget” as Shane Moran’s readers “compare their memories and interpretations” with those of the author.

The diary opens on 31st October 2022 with an entry, ironically self-declaratory, titled “Conspiracy Theorist”, offering an account, by a detached observer, of the pandemic up to that point. The next week’s entry, “Murmuration” -- suggesting complaint, grumbling, rumour, but beautifully illustrated with a photograph of a flight of starlings -- opens in the voice of an anonymous functionary, addressing attendees at the launch of the “Provisional Report of the International Commission for Knowledge”, evoking a crisis past which originated in “Central Province” where the ginkgo plant grows. The functionary introduces “Professor Drosten Zirken of the Imperial School of Epidemiological Psychometrics at the University of North Carolina, Bunker XEBVII” – the name combines the surname of the eminent COVID virologist with a suggestion of the German word for circle. In the Professor’s address Shane Moran imaginatively evokes both the strange active mist of starlings in flight and the mysterious spread of a virus, but Zirken’s concern is with the “selfish individualism” of those whose “Scoring low on agreeableness and high on narcissistic traits negatively affects compliance”. The Professor concludes “The swarm of fear and suspicion will not mislead foresight and common sense. Let us agree to continue the fight to create a fair world”. Shane Moran could no doubt agree although the words would mean something different to him.

In three entries from December 2022 Shane Moran comments on the report of “*The Lancet* Commission on lessons for the future from the COVID-19 pandemic”. The report’s viewpoint is unequivocally global: “Effective surveillance systems and control are essential to achieving universal vaccine coverage.” This requires that individuals and government regulations align with the needs of society generally. “Prosociality” is the virtue required and although it may not necessarily be benign, it embodies the Golden Rule of “whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do you even so to them”. (Matthew 7:12) Public health policy being by nature political, Shane Moran shows that *The Lancet* commission’s report in its confusion of compliance with health measures and compliance with vaccination equates “behavioural modification with an invasive medical procedure” and eventually implies that “Lack of prosociality equals death”. On the basis of quite slender and sometimes skewed evidence the report is critical of some national leaders and identifies safety with censorship rather than with free speech. “Despite deference to science, the modification of behaviour is the final destination”. At best, the report’s conclusions “are to be taken with a pinch of salt”. In a characteristic juxtaposition Shane Moran follows his *Lancet* analysis with an evocation, from a medieval nativity play, of the “Coventry Carol” which tells the story of Herod’s Massacre of the Innocents.

To his inhabitation of representative imaginary figures, his close analysis of manipulative public declarations, and his pointed citation of history, philosophy, poetry and science fiction, in the next sequence of entries Shane Moran adds a frank and generous evocation of his home. In “*Bad Blood*”, illustrated with a photograph of “Labyrinth, The Edge, Hogsback”, the speaker chides a neighbour or friend who, perhaps suffering from paranoia, has been out all night “jabbering on about the somebody trying to poison him”. Significantly “It was late morning when he was spotted over on the eastern slope of Morgellons” a name which does not show up on the map of Hogsback: Morgellons disease is a form of delusional parasitosis. The entry for January 14, 2023 is an elegiac conversation on human survival which commemorates Fabien Génin and Judith Masters, world-renowned primatologists -- friends, colleagues and Hogsback neighbours -- who were murdered in their home on October 3, 2022. South African resources are called on again in the entry for January 22, 2024. Dudley Kidd’s study *Savage Childhood* (1906) records that the Zulu have distinct words to express identity: *idhlozi* is the individual and *itongo* is the member of a group, which raises “The conundrum of logic and instinct – (natural) tendency to selfishness curbed by (natural) tendency to sociality and the relation between individual

and society, are inseparable from the idea of development,” which, Shane Moran argues, is inseparable from ethnography and colonialism. What, he asks, if the gross selfishness of individuals “coincided with the interests of the corporate union”? This leads to a consideration of the role of MacKinsey and Company, who have become “synonymous with downsizing, rationalization and increasing shareholder value”, in a South African State Owned Enterprise scandal and their involvement with the Guptas. In addition MacKinsey conspired with Purdue Pharma to contribute to the opioid crisis which has killed nearly half a million people. “These are enterprises that have a cost benefit calculation that covers the cost of fraud and negligent homicide”.

Shane Moran’s narrative sustains the continuity of neighbourhood while following the shocks of headline news, aiming “to contribute to the identification of some of the agents and strategies at work in the present”. He continues here with a study of Blackbird.AI an artificial Neural Networks company founded in 2014, so clearly at work with the surveillance state that “the state functions like a corporation” in which “the voters rate as minority shareholders”. The prospect is that “out of the surveillance state and monopoly capitalism the world corporate state emerges”. No wonder the Blackbird.AI logo recalls the Nazi *Parteiadler*. The political-corporate connivance is revealed in an account of Andrew Huff’s book *The Truth about Wuhan*, which uncovers a twofold lie “that the Chinese are solely responsible for the virus, and that the U.S. bio-military complex was not complicit in the development”. The lie went along with institutional failure: both academic and corporate researchers “have pursued reckless projects with little regard for public safety” often not acknowledging the limits of laboratory experiments. Shane Moran asks the question: was the pandemic the fulfilment of “a plan going back several decades involving meticulous legal and institutional co-ordination?”

The co-ordination is clear in the World Vaccine Congress, a series of trade events/conferences “covering the whole vaccine value chain” which show how “cutting-edge research efforts can be integrated with Pharma Biotech Academia Government to produce more and better vaccines *to the market*”. (My emphasis.) In South Africa the WHO’s influence meant that “policy would be dictated by manufacturing and distribution agreements, with national sovereignty subservient to commercial interests”. In effect “national sovereignty over public health policy is surrendered to the WHO”. In an essay “Building the Global Police State” Iain Davis and Whitney Webb argue that the COVID response “revealed that something is very wrong with today’s global institutions”. Despite at least the doubts about the positive potential of the vaccines, the WHO and the UN are “tied to the tale of vaccine efficacy”. The extremity of the situation is powerfully expressed by Katherine Watt, who argues that the US’s “medicalised totalitarianism” engages it in “a mass killing and sterilization campaign at home and abroad” and puts it “at war with its own people”. Some kind of sovereignty, in Shane Moran’s argument, “is dissolving supposedly discredited national sovereignty.”

But individual sovereignty and personal integrity are also threatened, as is instanced in the court case *Bridges vs. Methodist Hospital*, in which employees of the hospital sought to block management’s injection requirement and the terminations that would follow on refusal. Shane Moran highlights this sentence from the Judge’s decision: the claimants were “refusing to accept an inoculation that, in the hospital’s judgment, will make it safer for their workers and the patients...” Inoculation implies immunity, yet, as Katherine Watt points out, by this stage “the dangers and failures of the vaccines were evident”.

On August 17, 2023, in another judgment, the Pretoria High Court instructed the South African government to disclose their confidential contracts for Covid vaccine. The contract with Pfizer defines the product as a vaccine, intended for the prevention of Covid-19, not promising that it will prevent the disease. In fact by the time their South African contract was amended (on June 4, 2021) Pfizer knew and had acknowledged “that there were serious problems with their product”, yet the purchaser, the South African government, had to accept “that the long-term effects and efficacy of the Vaccine are not currently known and that there may be adverse effects of the Vaccine that are not currently known”. After a pointed reference to what one might call the politics of animal behaviour, Shane Moran concludes: “Today, while corporate power is busy digesting state power, basic patterns

of behaviour remain the same. Contracts and covenants shape the coercive environment. Appeals to fairness and justice hold little water in the eyes of those riding the tide of history”.

In “A Country Doctor”, a moving interlude, Shane Moran records that “My doctor died suddenly on June 20, 2021”. As many of us would, he acknowledges that he is inclined to trust doctors, “they have saved my life. Learning by clinical experience is reason at work: empirical observation and deduction, the interpretive method of science.” The memory introduces a contrasting discussion of the work of another, internationally distinguished, doctor, Salim Karim, Chair of the South African Ministerial Advisory Committee on Covid-19. In Dr Karim’s book *Standing Up for Science: A Voice of Reason: South Africa’s Science Advisor at the Frontlines of the Pandemic* (2023) we can read of “the rationale behind historic decisions”. South Africa’s disastrous response to HIV Aids might have encouraged “faith in the effectiveness of novel pharmaceuticals” yet “Realism about novel vaccines that prevent neither illness nor transmission of disease reinforces the need for draconian social control”. Dr Karim concludes in the hope that the pandemic treaty will signal “an era of global leadership that oversees a universal health system that will serve all countries with justice, transparency and equality.” As Shane Moran observes “The key point is that South Africa will be strengthened by ceding authority to global institutions”.

Dr Karim’s invocation of “global leadership and solidarity ... a universal health system ... that will serve all countries with justice, transparency and equality” keeps in mind the idea of “humanity” which has been a theme which Shane Moran keeps before his readers throughout. A meditation sparked largely by Derrida and his reference to Carl Schmitt leads to what is for me one of the most moving passages in *Living Memory* : “There can be no legitimate sovereignty evoked in the name of humanity for, in political terms, there is no enemy of humanity (at least on this planet); no other of humanity with whom we can be in political conflict ... the only enemy of humanity could be non-human, alien...” (Shane Moran has earlier evoked H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* and its “narrator fighting for survival against immune compromised aliens”.)

Shane Moran’s two closing entries are perhaps ironically titled -- “Sophist” and “Book Worm” -- but the conclusions of his argument are grim.: “The documents have been verified. It seems that an attack emanating from the U.S. in co-ordination with global organisations aimed at discrediting nation states.” And in the final pages, after waking to “a beautiful Eastern Cape dawn” the writer clicks on his screen where an item catches his eye. It is a sad letter to Dr. John Campbell from a patient in South Africa who has fallen sick after a second vaccine: “So now my life is just in limbo ... never knowing when is my last day”.

In an entry describing a walk with friends engaged in a characteristically philosophical conversation on what may be called the politics of medicine one of the party calls the others “snot-nosed whiners ... Always wallowing in self-pity and evasiveness ... gloating over our misfortune.” But Shane Moran’s diary is a careful, honest, eloquent response, not only to a global crisis, but to the challenges of living in the modern world, both facing up to its challenges and celebrating its joys and generosity. His argument seems to me powerful and he is sensitively aware of “You, the reader”. The encouragement is always “You decide ... reflect for a moment ... Judge for yourself ... for each reader to decide” and perhaps most powerfully “think again”.

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